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## A Commentary on 3 photographs by Angus Boulton

The three photographs selected here form part of Angus Boulton's study of abandoned Cold War sites in Berlin, and military bases relinquished after the fall of the Berlin wall and collapse of the GDR. Both the BONH and the 41 Gymnasia projects offer a series of reflections on the relationship between art and politics, presence and absence. On his website, Boulton notes that his work forms a 'visual representation of particular situations, spaces and locations': but if space is a product 'filled with ideologies', as Lefebvre put it, then Boulton shows us spaces with their ideologies extracted.<sup>1</sup> Boulton says that if there is a persistent theme in his photographs, it is 'the trace of human presence': people, human relationships, bodies and faces are all absent from these photographs, and yet, they somehow infuse them.

Walter Benjamin argued that the work of art takes on a new sense of meaning in the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>2</sup> With the advent of photography, sound recording and film, when a photograph, piece of music or moving image is reproduced in massive quantities and at immediate speed, the idea of an authentic or original work of art is 'liquidated'. The work of art becomes disconnected from its 'aura' or original identity. In consequence, the task of the critic is not to look for the 'origin' of the work of art or to dissect its original meaning: it is rather to understand the work of art in its process of becoming. In the photograph, the 'original' moment is always already past. Boulton's photographs engage with this notion of the 'afterlife' that so captivated Benjamin.

Rather than try and capture a picture of power, a place or moment in time (if such a task is indeed possible), Boulton's photographs explore the trace of what has been. His photographs of the 'Bunker Entrance, at Altes Lager' (10/04/03) and the 'Firing Range, at Forst Zinna' (22/07/99) are not attempts to capture a political order that has passed. Similarly, the empty gymnasium seen in 'Kramnitz I' (09/12/98) is not offered as a nostalgic meditation on loss. Rather, these photographs carve open a space for reflecting on this relationship between what was and what now is, between what used to fill these spaces and how they could be filled again.

The dominant way of reading the relationship between art and politics continues to rely on an obsession with origins (and meaning).<sup>3</sup> In questioning the origins or ends of a work of art, we already assume a particular relationship between art, politics, time and the community. This approach presupposes a particular community of unity that relates to, responds or receives the work of art. The community can disparage or acclaim the origin (as the product of genius, or as in/authentic), or question the ends of the work of art (such as we find in the quagmire of elitist vs public art debates). These approaches revolve around an endless return to origin, and

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by David Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968)

<sup>3</sup> 'As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in.' Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (London; New York: Continuum, 2004) p.20. It was Michael J. Shapiro's article that led me to the engagement with Rancière, 'The Sublime Today: Re-Partitioning the Global Sensible', in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Special Issue: Between Fear and Wonder: International Politics, Representation and 'the Sublime', Vol. 34, No.3, 2006 pp. 657-682. For interesting reflections on the practices of inclusion and exclusion in modern politics, discussed using Rancière's works, see Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Locating Political Space Through Time' in C. Grundy-Warr & P Kumar Rajaram, *Borderscapes. Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Borderlines Vol. 29)

as a result, are confined to a limited vocabulary for reflecting on the relationship between art and politics. However, Jacques Rancière writes that we can think of the relationship between art, politics, time and community differently. Rather than raise the question of the relationship between art and politics after our commonality has been established, once we've already agreed what we take politics to be, the question might be raised as an intervention in the politics of origins. I want to suggest that Boulton's photographs address this question of the politics of origins.

To understand the modality of this argument, we must first of all appreciate what Rancière means by politics. Rancière understands politics in relation to what he calls 'the distribution of the sensible'.<sup>4</sup> The distribution of the sensible refers to the establishment of some sense of commonality between members of the community and to the distribution of exclusive parts. Political community is based on the sum of its parts and this sharing out of parts involves an allocation of spaces, times and forms of activity 'that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.'<sup>5</sup> However, this distribution of the sensible is preceded by another form of distribution: the one that establishes who will get to decide what is common to the community. Rancière describes this prior determination as the 'aesthetics' at the 'core of the community'.<sup>6</sup> This aesthetics involves establishing the modes, terms and forms of participating in the common community:

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.<sup>7</sup>

These modes, terms and forms are necessarily contingent and open to challenge. The task of establishing the commonality of the community will therefore also involve marking its limits. These are the exclusions that precede the possibility of lending ourselves to participation: these are the barbarians, aliens and others that remain outside the time of the community.

What Rancière is saying then, I believe, is that we may raise the question of the relationship between art and politics at the foundational level of how we should build and organise a political community: at 'the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization.'<sup>8</sup> This is the site at which the question of the relationship between art and politics becomes most interesting, in my view. Boulton's photographs engage this question of the 'aesthetics' at the core of community by circling the multiple 'properties of space and the possibilities of time'.

Boulton's photographs can be understood as interventions in the question of origins precisely because they dwell at the interface between absence and presence, community and nothingness. Yet, crucially, the relationship between these categories is not understood according to the logic of longing or progress: there is no aim to get from one state to another along an arrow of time. Instead, these photographs weigh heavily in-between. In this, they disturb the 'homogenous empty time' that Walter Benjamin described as infusing the community of unity. They pose the possibility of other temporalities. They provoke questions about what other forms of community could have been possible and what alternative forms of organising political life might be uncovered in the trace of human presence.

Angharad Closs Stephens (2<sup>nd</sup> draft, 26 February 2008)

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.12

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.18